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NEWDIGATE PRIZE POEM.

Battle of Stamford Bridge.

READ IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 13, 1877.

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1877

BY

J. BROOKS,

Merton Coll.

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"Arma virumque cano."

London :

FROM A BOOK FUND COMMEMORATING
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It's a sad thing
 when a man is to be so soon forgotten
And the shining in his soul
 gone from the earth
With no thing remaining;

And it's a sad thing
 when a man shall die
And forget love
 which is the shiningness of life;

But it's a sadder thing
 that a man shall forget love
And he not dead but walking in the field
 of a May morning
And listening to the voice of the thrush.

— R.G.A., in *A Yearbook of
Stanford Writing*, 1931

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RECITED IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

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Oxford :

THOS. SHRIMPTON & SON, BROAD STREET.

1877.

[REDACTED]



The Battle of Stamford Bridge.

FREEDOM, immortal mistress of the wave,
Mother of honour, lover of the brave,
Behold, I seek thine island throne to ask
Thy gracious hands to guide me in my task;
No mortal aid, no patronage divine
My lips have sought, ere they entreated thine,
Whose eyes beheld in unforgotten years
The Northman's strength, the might of England's
peers,
Whose hands upheld in their uncertain hour
The son of Godwin^a and the Saxon power,
Whose lips re-echoed widowed England's moan
O'er Senlac's fatal field, and Harold's forfeit throne.

^a Harold was the son of Godwin Earl of Wessex.

From where the dumb past veils from mortal gaze
Forgotten deeds and unacknowledged days,
And memory weeps her unavailing tears
O'er dead old times and graves of buried years,
Summon, O Goddess, each from his still tomb,
The slumbering monarchs of the realms of gloom,
Heroes and kings, the mighty ones and great,
Whose iron will controlled the hands of Fate.

Clothed in sad pomp, before their children's eyes
The royal shadows of the dead arise :
No flush of fight, no crown of triumph now
On Northman's cheek or fair-haired Saxon's brow,
But pale they stand, and dumb, and very still,
Withheld from good and ignorant of ill ;
Their eyes know not of daytime or the night,
Nor move their lips for sorrow or delight ;
Their very forms are strange as ancient rhymes
Sung to the wakeful ear of younger times ;
The warrior's hand is cold, the king's head bowed,
The purple robe has yielded to the shroud.

Alas! the jealous fears of anxious Night
Too soon recall the sons she lends to Light,
And evermore from Nature's shuddering breast
Are torn away the souls that loved her best.
They fade, and fall, and pass; their glories set;
Blind Time heeds not, men see, but men forget.
Think not that these pale shadows, dimly cast
By the mist-shrouded orb that lights the past,
Stand as *they* stood who in Time's earlier years
Ruled the wide world and claimed the gods for
peers ;
Who saw that awful hour of glorious strife,
Whose distant echoes ring with sounds of life,
When Saxon England faced her northern foes,
And sword met sword, and the wild cry arose
That told the earth, the sea and changeless sky,
How heroes conquer and how warriors die !

No pallid shade in those old days was he,
The northern lover of the virgin sea,

Whose light winds blew, and foam-tipped billows
curled

To aid her chosen spoil a helpless world.

In that wild time, fulfilled of fierce delight,

His red lips drained all pleasures of the fight ;

A warrior he, he owned a warrior god,

And scourged the nations with his Odin's rod.

At his rude touch the tortured earth grew red,

And prostrate peoples writhed beneath his tread.

Freedom beheld him, and the goddess quailed ;

England beheld him, faced him, fled, and failed ;

And fair France knew him, when the hands of Fate

From her warm breast had torn her royal mate,

And felt his hot breath scorch her widowed face,^b

^b The incursions of the Northmen in France date from the age of Charles the Great, but during the life of that Emperor did not become formidable, only a few exposed places being attacked. After his death the coast of France was constantly plundered, and in the time of his grandson Charles the Bald, not even the island country was safe from the Northern pirates. See Hallam's *History of Europe in the Middle Ages*.

And her white body faint at his embrace.
The sword, the sceptre of his power, went forth^c
To rule the barren beauties of the north,
And the warm south heard echoes of his tread
When his stained hand caressed Italia's head.^d
Son of the north, cradled by wood and cave,
As fierce and fresh as is thy ocean's wave,
Though from thy kiss the affrighted nations fled,
And lips grew white at touch of thy mouth's red,
Yet thy rough grasp was full of strength and life,
And thy sharp sword wrought peace by very strife,
And Europe, moulded in thy furnace fire,
Rose up imperial, and the world's desire.^e

^c The Baltic was the *first* scene of Scandinavian valour. The piratical expeditions resulted in the formation of a Scandinavian dynasty in Russia under Ruric, A.D. 862. See Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

^d For an account of the Norman conquests in Sicily and Italy and the exploits of Robert Guiscard, see Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

^e For an account of the invigorating effects of Danish conquests, see Stubbs' *Constitutional History of England*.

But none shall triumph always: one by one
Nations must perish as their work is done;
New races rise, and sons of later birth
Supplant the elder offsprings of the earth;
The old arm withers, and the young hand steers
Time's hurrying coursers up the trackless years.
So when Hadrada heard the traitor's call,^f
Shook the old North and tottered to its fall,
Pale grew the Naiads of the northern wave,
Far fled the spirits of the wood and cave,
To change the grey and green of rock and tree
For white, still spaces of the frozen sea.
Ye Gods and mighty, were the times too late
For your commands to check the streams of Fate,
To stay one instant's space its torrent tide,
And call your hero from the tempter's side?

^f Tostig or Tosti, having been deprived of his earldom of Northumbria for tyranny by Edward the Confessor at the instigation of Harold, retired to Flanders, and after the death of Edward, attempted to restore himself by the aid of Harold Hadrada King of Norway, to whom he is said to have offered half the kingdom of England in the event of their success.

Ay, for "all-father" Odin's ears forgot,
And the blue eyes of Freya heeded not,^g
Earth and her sons, the great gods heard the breath
And turned to meet the awful gaze of death.
No hand was moved in that momentous hour
To avert the downfall of Hadrada's power ;
Full of the dreams that Fancy ever wrought
In the dark shades that hide a monarch's thought,
The northern chieftain wooed an island bride,
Wooed her with arms and at a traitor's side,
And crossed the storm-tossed leagues of barren wave
To seek an empire, and to find—a grave.^h

No breath of wind the crimson banner stirred,
Still lay the wings of that ill-omened bird

^g Odin, father of the Gods, the Jupiter of Scandinavian worship. Freya is the northern *Venus* and must be distinguished from Fréa the *Juno* of the north. See Noel's *Dictionnaire de la Fable*.

^h He was killed at the battle of Stamford Bridge. Legend relates that he was slain by the hand of Harold, but the story seems to be without foundation.

Whose night-black figure mystic sisters three
Had wrought, a sign of Northern victory,¹
On the loud morn when England's sons arose
To test the valour of their heathen foes.
Then wild Northumbria, whose bleak shore had bled
So sorely and so oft beneath his tread,
Looked her last look on her remorseless foe,
Had her revenge and saw his overthrow:
Saw her white waters dyed a crimson hue,
Saw her brown heather drink a ghastly dew,
When the fierce force of Harold's peerless might
Swept through the surging masses of the fight,
Hurled the red banner from its bed of sand,
And drove the pagan pirate from the land.

¹ "Their national flag was the figure of a black raven woven on a blood red ground,—when it fluttered its wings they believed that Odin gave them a sign of victory." (Hume.) Lappenberg mentions this banner as the rallying-point of the army in the battle. He informs us also that its old name was "*Landeyda*," *i.e.*, the desolation of lands. For a further account of the banner and the sisters who made it, see Bulwer Lytton's *Harold*.

Sore are the tears that pale the weeper's cheek,
Cruel the grief that finds no voice to speak ;
But the exceeding bitter cry, the prayer
That claims revenge from earth and sea and air,
Or, mad, invokes the pale sky's heedless spheres,
Outweighs the heaviest grief of speechless tears.
Rose such a cry from Norway's stricken shore¹
O'er her lost children that return no more,
Piercing the steel-blue hollows of the sky
With wild excess of bitterest agony.
The shrill shriek clamoured to the gods—but they
Unsceptred and discrowned had passed away.
But though their dead gods fail the fallen race,
A son of man has claimed the avenger's place,
A black-browed warrior, strong of will and hand,
Mighty to conquer, fitted for command.—

¹ The Scandinavian empire had been broken up before this period, and the Kingdom of Denmark was now separated from that of Norway. For this reason I have throughout avoided the use of the term "Dane," for, though at a previous time it expressed the whole body of Scandinavian pirates, its use at so advanced a period could not be allowable.

Behold where Sussex' wave-washed cliffs arise,
White-robed, to meet the gaze of moonlit skies :
There the full tide is moaning to the beach,
And wild winds sigh fulfilled of tearful speech,
And prescient Nature mourns in wind and wave
The Ocean's queen—the Norman conqueror's slave.
For the pale moon from her high throne beholds
Red watch-fires gleam and glare through drifting folds
Of restless mist—and hark ! from mouth to mouth
Passes the whisper of the shuddering south :
London has heard—with trembling lips and white,
Lone horsemen breathe the rumour to the night ;
And, big with woe, the spectre Fear strides forth
To meet the victor monarch in the north ;
Strikes dumb the host yet flushed with fight and spoil,
And tells that Rollo's son is camped on English soil.*

* William the Conqueror was descended from the famous Rolf or Rollo, who wrested a portion of territory from Charles the Simple at the peace of Clair-sur-Epte, and so founded the Duchy of Normandy, or Northman's Land. The news of William's landing was brought to Harold at York, where he was celebrating his victory at Stamford Bridge by a great feast.

Harold, if feeble words and mortal speech
To the high empire of the dead could reach,
And our slow thoughts, on wings of broken rhyme,
Could speed across the trackless land of time,
Age upon age to thy glad soul should prove
The ceaseless flow of grateful England's love.
Most royal Saxon, by the dreary hour
That saw thy brother¹ arm against thy power,
By thy fierce haste in England's dire distress,
By wild Northumbria's blood-stained wilderness,
By Senlac's fatal field, the hard-fought strife,
The martyr's death that crowned the patriot's life,
By Edith's love, and by the shroud she wrought
For the poor corpse her own white feet had sought ;^m
By all the tender memories that cling
To the faint figure of our Saxon king,

¹ Tosti. See Note f.

^m The story of Edith is variously related, and it is uncertain what was her connection with Harold. Thorpe in his edition of Dr. Lappenberg's great work makes her to be his wife. Lingard mentions the legend but does not appear to believe in it.

We hail thee true type of our country's past,
Victor and martyr, English to the last.

The Norman came, the Saxon passed away :
But through the din of ruin and decay
Freedom sat throned in never-changing skies.
The light of her divine and pitying eyes
Shone through the tempest clouds of that dark hour
When England bowed before her conqueror's power ;
And the warm stream of Freedom's tender tears
Watered the waste lands of the barren years,
When the relentless despot's icy hand
Checked all the throbbing life-beat of the land.
And when the thunder-clouds and darkness fled,
To veil no more our virgin Island's head,
Freedom bound up the bruised and bleeding side,
And kissed the lips by suffering purified.
Goddess ! be with us still ; let thy clear voice
For ever rule the people of thy choice ;
Till England do the work that must be done,
Teach the rude world, and make its nations one ;

And, free from wrongs, unstained by guilty tears,
Grow greater, purer, with the rolling years;
Till all men hail her mother, tender, true,
And free—the England Saxon Harold knew.









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